

The Mystery of *Exiles*

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In *Exiles*, Richard Rowan confesses:

In the very core of my ignoble heart I longed to be betrayed by you and by her—in the dark, in the night—secretly, meanly, craftily. By you, my best friend, and by her.

As Buck Mulligan puts it in *Ulysses*, Greater love hath no man, that he lay down his wife for his friend.

Reading between the sheets, Richard is right there at the dark heart of the action. After all, what use is it to be betrayed by your wife and your best friend if you don't have the evidence right in front of your eyes? And since you're a Doubting Thomas and while you're there... well, you might as well. It would seem rude not to.

Joyce is known to have read Richard von Krafft-Ebing's groundbreaking work of 1893, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. The dirtiest bits are in Latin: perverts are not cunning linguists, it seems. But that Joyce read it is hardly headline news. Joyce evidently read everything that had ever been written - and most of which had not yet been. In this groundbreakingly frank text, Krafft-Ebing challenges:

“What would poetry and art be without a sexual foundation?”

Today I want to pry into the sexual foundation of Joyce's art.

In *Ulysses* George Russell dismisses

‘this prying into the family life of a great man [as i]interesting only to the parish clerk... I mean, we have the plays. I mean when we read the poetry of King Lear, what is it to us how the poet lived?’

That repetition of ‘I mean’ is a thumb on the scale to indicate that Stephen at least, and perhaps Joyce, regards this as facile nonsense. Stephen goes on to speculate on, to use Krafft-Ebing's phrase, the ‘sexual foundation’ within the known biographical facts about Shakespeare and the plots, the characters and the concerns of his plays.

Russell's point is that biography is merely literary gossip and sheds little light on the work. However, perhaps more than any other writer than Shakespeare, Joyce demands that we do take his biography into account: to understand the work we need to know the life.

So the biography matters. And in the index to the standard biography by Richard Ellmann – between Best, Dr Richard, librarian, Celtic scholar (and character in that episode of *Ulysses* from which I've just quoted); and Bewley's Café in Dublin (featured location in *Ulysses*) – there is an entry for 'Betrayal.' It's ten lines long, and betrayal is the central theme of *Exiles* and the one I wish to consider today.

Irreverent Catholics sometimes refer to the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, who is depicted as a dove – as 'two blokes and a bird:' In Joyce's work and, as we shall see, in his life, we have the image of an Unholy Trinity... two blokes and a bird. It is the image of a woman, flanked on one side by a man, with another, secondary man on the other side. I shall refer to the man as the lover, the woman as the love interest and the other man as... well, the other man.

The lover is the woman's partner, perhaps but not necessarily her husband (insisting on that would be too bourgeois), her possessor, her worshipper. The other man is a threat, come to steal her away by whatever means necessary. And the lover is torn: if he defeats the other man, the suitor, by force, as does Odysseus, then what price love that is not free to choose? And if he leaves his woman free to take another lover and she takes that bull by the horn, as Molly does, what does this say about his own inadequacy and insufficiency, and how can he be confident she won't end up rejecting him altogether? So he's damned if she doesn't and doubly damned if she does. And damned in any case: in a world full of other men with one thing on their minds, how can he ever be finally certain of her fidelity? Fidelity, unlike paternity, is a negative, and a negative is impossible to prove, even with a DNA test.

As we shall see, during the course of Joyce's fiction this image gradually comes sharply into focus. In an early episode of *Portrait* it informs a blazing family row, but is in the background, vague and mysterious and alluring and threatening all at once. In *The Dead*, the final in Joyce's book of short stories *Dubliners*, it is the cause of an epiphany, a revelation to Gabriel Conroy that shakes his confidence in his wife's undivided love for him. But at least it is from a lost love, a boy who's now long dead, before Gabriel and Greta even knew of each other's existence. In *Ulysses* it constitutes what plot there is, and sticks out like a... well, for the sake of propriety let's say it sticks out like a hatrack. Leopold and Molly Bloom have come adrift over the past decade, since the death of their ten day old son. We are told they have not had (quote) 'complete carnal intercourse' (end quote) in 10 years, 5 months and 18 days. You might wonder who's counting. *Much Ado About Nothing*. Or *Love's Labours Lost*, perhaps.

This morning, on Thursday 16th June 1904, Leopold Bloom sets sail from 7 Eccles St, knowing that that notorious pants man Blazes Boylan is to come to their house at half past four and that Molly and Blazes will, er, get along like a house on fire, fire being the result of vigorous friction. All day Bloom's thoughts return to this, and he has every opportunity to

return home and stage coitus interruptus, yet he allows it to happen, perhaps even wishes for it.

Here are two extraordinary and apparently contradictory images in *Ulysses*. The first image is in that hallucinatory fever dream Circe:

BOYLAN: (Jumps surely from the car and calls loudly for all to hear.) Hello, Bloom! Mrs Bloom dressed yet?

BLOOM: (In flunkey's prune plush coat and kneebreeches, buff stockings and powdered wig.) I'm afraid not, sir. The last articles...

BOYLAN: (Tosses him sixpence.) Here, to buy yourself a gin and splash. (He hangs his hat smartly on a peg of Bloom's antlered head.) Show me in. I have a little private business with your wife, you understand? [...] You can apply your eye to the keyhole and play with yourself while I just go through her a few times.

Now I think this is both funny and poignant. Bloom is simultaneously drawn and repelled, privileged to witness and at the same time humiliated. He wants to have his ache and eat it.

The second image is one of apparent though highly ambivalent reconciliation. Like Odysseus, Bloom finally makes it home, though after 20 hours rather than 20 years. In bed,

He kissed the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump, on each plump melonous hemisphere, in their mellow yellow furrow, with obscure prolonged provocative melonsmellonous osculation.

Now I think this is both gross and lyrical. It's still not full sexual intercourse, but you've got to start somewhere. Start at the bottom, as it were, and go from there.

6. And in between *The Dead*, written in 1907 when Joyce was just 25 years old and *Ulysses*, written between 1914 and 1922, is *Exiles*, started in 1912 and finished in late 1914/early 1915, just as Joyce is getting into his work on *Ulysses*. (There will be a written exam at the end of this paper, so I hope you're keeping up and taking notes.)

Here once again we have that very same image, front and centre: two blokes and a bird. The play ends... well, I won't tell you, and I look forward to your response after you've seen it.

I contend that in Joyce's fiction this image is central - but, that its focus shifts. In *The Dead* the focus is on Gabriel Conroy, the affronted husband who, in our eyes surely unjustly, feels himself betrayed. Gretta Conroy is secondary, the cause of his sudden dismay. In *Exiles* the puppet master is Richard, the woman Bertha, the challenger Robert. Richard is the possessor – he is Rich: Robert has come to vie for her attentions: he comes to Rob.

In *Ulysses* the image starts through the lens, the thoughts, the mind of Leopold Bloom; but the missus gets the last word. (This may not be the first time that phrase has been uttered, nor I suspect the last.) Her name is Marion Bloom, Marion by the way being an anagram of I'M NORA – which I take as a come hither to pry into the family life of this great man.

So Exiles is a three quarter house along the road to Ulysses. (You'll notice by the way that I omit discussion of Finnegans Wake, for the sake of simplicity. Omitting discussion of Finnegans Wake nearly always results in greater simplicity. A shout out to the Melbourne Finnegans Wake Reading Circle, which is represented here today. We're into year six, we're on meeting 63 and so far we've reached page 127. You're welcome to join us... there's no hurry.

Perhaps there's a clue here in Exiles. Bertha is the mother of her and Richard's child: she is, literally, a *birther*. His name is Archie, which is a nod to Ulysses (it's not only Homer who nods), where the son of Odysseus and Penelope is Telemachus, which means he who fights from a long way away: an archer.

So maybe that's our answer: Joyce gets it from literature, specifically from Homer. He calls his magnum opus Ulysses, the Latinised version of Odysseus. You will recall what set off the Trojan war was Helen of Sparta departing with Paris to Troy, though whose idea and decision that was, remains open to debate: she could be a strumpet - the Trojan whore, you might call her - or, more sympathetically, a victim of sexual kidnapping. So there's that Unholy Trinity image again: Menelaus-Helen-Paris. And the subject of the Odyssey is Odysseus' attempts to get home from the war to reclaim his kingdom, a principal asset of which is Penelope, who is besieged by 108 suitors.

So perhaps that's our clue. The original sense of 'clue' by the way was a ball of thread, hence one used to guide a person out of a labyrinth. And who was it who designed the labyrinth at Crete? Daedalus. Another use for a ball of thread is to sew, and Penelope is a weaver, as is Helen, and even Molly has to mend and make do. Joyce we know was inspired by the Odyssey as a boy. So, case closed, then?

No, far from it. This image is intensely personal to Joyce the man, the child, the lover, the husband and, in his own imagination at least, the simultaneously willing and not willing cuckold.

The technical term for this, I can now reveal, is troilism. It sounds as if we're right back in Homer's territory, back at Troy, but in fact it probably comes from French, *trois*. Alternatively, some think it may come from Troilus and Cressida, where Ulysses forces Troilus to watch his lover, Cressida, with another man... so maybe there is a distant Trojan connection via Ulysses after all. Whatever, it's a fairly recondite term. In fact when I wanted to include the term in my description of this paper, Frances advised against on the basis of its obscurity. She may well be right: it is, perhaps, the word unknown to all men. And not only to men: amusingly I find that Brenda Maddox, in her excellent biography of Nora Barnacle, has it as misspelt as 'triolism.'

To me at least it is surprising that the word is first attested according to the Oxford English Dictionary as late as 1941, the year of Joyce's death and is defined there as *sexual activity in which three persons take part simultaneously*. It is also associated, perhaps not surprisingly, with same sex attraction between the two men.

There is an essential ambivalence to all this: the visceral attraction of the image of two men intimately united in this way, clashing with the horror of homosexuality at the time Joyce is growing up – Oscar Wilde’s trial for homosexuality in 1895 takes place when Joyce is just 13 years old.

Let us not forget that the locus classicus of betrayal, of course, is Judas kissing Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. As Othello says of Desdemona, ‘I kiss’d thee ere I kill’d thee,’ Othello’s being another story of real betrayal and imagined adultery. And returning to Oscar, in the Ballad of Reading Gaol he writes:

“Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard
Some do it with a bitter look
Some with a flattering word
The coward does it with a kiss
The brave man with a sword.”

And in Wilde's play, Salome takes a lascivious fancy to John the Baptist, and when he spurns her affections she has him put to death. She takes up John's severed head and... kisses it.

Yet these are mere literary treatments. I am speaking of things infinitely more personal to Joyce, deeply intimate, personal experiences that are the sexual foundation of Joyce’s poetry and art.

As a boy, James Joyce grows up with a father who, like Orson Welles, has his career backwards: he starts at the top and works his way down, beginning wealthy and ending up doing moonlight flits to avoid paying the rent. He pawns or sells everything, including his fancy clothes, though he hangs onto his hat, his top hat being the signature of a gentleman, so that he can fool the next landlord into thinking him a gentleman, and thus with no need for such formalities as references. A classic case of Joyce senior writing cheques he cannot cash.

Such a sense of entitlement, without the moolah to back it up, does strange things to a boy, no doubt.

In his early twenties, Joyce junior is wandering around Dublin insisting on being treated as a literary genius, without having any evidence to support the claim: a case, I suppose, not of writing cheques you cannot cash, but of cashing cheques you’ve not yet written.

His father’s hero, and thus his own, is Charles Stewart Parnell, the Irish nationalist politician whose party held the balance of power at Westminster during the Home Rule debates of the mid-1880s. Later Joyce describes Parnell’s legendary coldness (quote):

‘When the Irish people presented him with a national gratuity of 40,000 pounds sterling in 1887, he put the cheque into his billfold, and in the speech which he delivered to the immense gathering made not the slightest reference to the gift which he had received.’

It’s not clear that Joyce is disapproving, and certainly his own lack of gratitude to his many benefactors, most of them women, would give Parnell a run for his money.

Of this hero worship, Richard Ellmann has this to say: ‘Most young men fancy themselves as Hamlets,’ he writes, which may say more about the crowd young Dick used to hang out with than it does about most young men. ‘Most young men fancy themselves as Hamlets; Joyce, as later hints make clear, fancied himself as a Parnell.’

In late 1890, when Joyce is just eight years old, Parnell is revealed as an adulterer, and although he is himself a protestant, the Catholic Church, his party and his friends roundly betray him. Within a year Parnell is dead.

Years later, in 1912, Joyce writes *Gas From A Burner*, a bitter tirade that includes these lines:

This lovely land always sent
Her writers and artists into banishment
And in a spirit of Irish fun
Betrayed her own leaders, one by one.
‘Twas Irish humour, set and dry,
Flung quicklime into Parnell’s eye.

Not yer man’s best work, admittedly, but revealing of his image of himself as banished, banned and betrayed, and his model is Charles Stewart Parnell, ice in the heart and fire in the loins.

The scene that must spring to mind is the traumatic Christmas dinner of 1891 in *Portrait*, when the young Stephen’s father and his father’s friend rage over Parnell’s betrayal and death, and Dante Conway, the old woman living with them, full of venomous piety, quits the table and the household. She exiles herself, in fact.

Passion is a temptation that costs Parnell his political ambitions, his friends and ultimately his life. So the connection is made, right in Joyce’s earliest youth and even before puberty, between sexual, political and personal betrayal.

A peculiar twist of Parnell’s adultery with Kitty O’Shea is the complicity of her husband, Captain William O’Shea. (Kitty by the way was the insulting name given her in the midst of the scandal: it’s a late Victorian term for a prostitute. I’ll call her Katie, which is what her friends called her.)

When Captain O’Shea goes to court in 1890 seeking a divorce and citing Parnell as the man with whom he accuses his wife of committing adultery, Katie’s counter-accusation is that he was complicit,

By inducing, directing and requiring the respondent to form the acquaintance of the co-respondent, and to see him along in the interest and for the advantage of the petitioner.

Joyce was a keen follower of trials of all kinds, and would certainly know the grubby details of this one – not at the time, when he is so young, but later, when his identification with Parnell has matured.

In effect, O'Shea is pimping out his wife, and Parnell is paying for access to her body. And so we have that template of a woman together with two men, the possessor somewhere between cuckold and organiser, an image that Joyce is to return to repeatedly in his private life, in his fiction and in *Exiles*.

One morning thirteen years later, in June 1904, a young man meets a young woman on the streets of Dublin and they fall in love. By September the young man, James Joyce, has left Ireland with the young woman, Nora Barnacle. Joyce glorifies the adventure as exile, though in reality there is little to keep them in Ireland.

Apart from brief visits, neither ever returns. Skip forward another five years, to 1909, and one of those visits takes place, when James, now aged 27, returns to Dublin to establish Ireland's first cinema, the Volta. Two years before this, Joyce has written *The Dead*, basing it upon Nora's tale of a young boy who died for love of her. Buried in Rahaon cemetery (though in *The Dead* Joyce relocates him 17 miles to Oughterard), he is no threat to Joyce now. The threat is now to come from another quarter entirely, and worst and best of all in the form of a friend. Vincent Cosgrave, tells him that the reason why Nora had only been available on alternate evenings back in 1904 was not, as she said, because she was working as a chambermaid at Finns Hotel, but because she was seeing him, Cosgrave.

The only mature response to this would be, 'And your point?' That, however, is not how Joyce reacts. He is beyond devastated. He writes an appalling letter to Nora, back home on her own in Trieste, bringing up their daughter, accusing her of betrayal but omitting to include details that would enable her to know what the hell he is talking about. I can't imagine how devastating this is to her, economically and even linguistically dependent on him, alone, so far away, unable to defend herself from accusations that make no sense to her at all.

What saves him is his good friend John Byrne, who takes him home and talks some much-needed sense into him and bucks him up generally in orthodox Samaritan fashion which he very badly needed. Joyce is convinced by Byrne that Cosgrave was stirring and that there was no truth in it, and the crisis is overcome. Although it is perhaps worth pointing out that, as we've already noticed, fidelity is not susceptible of proof. Joyce's acceptance of Nora's fidelity on the word of a friend is as unsubstantiated as his acceptance of her betrayal.

But Joyce is never one to forgive or forget, and Cosgrave gets his, big time. His literary alter ego in *Ulysses* is Lynch, whose final role is the friend who betrays Stephen by abandoning him when he is attacked by soldiers. Stephen points at his departing figure and says (quote), 'Exit Judas. Et laqueo se suspendit.' *Exit Judas, and he hanged himself with a noose.* Here we are, back at the betrayal by Judas. And Joyce, always happy to claim proof of his prophetic powers, is thoroughly well pleased when, in 1927, Cosgrave's body is found floating in the Thames, apparently the result of suicide.

Joyce's psyche is rubbed red raw by all this, it seems to me. It informs his work, and it continues to absorb his attention in his private life, too. There is a peculiar episode in Italy in 1912 highly reminiscent of the action in *Exiles* when Joyce encourages a mutual friend, Roberto Prezioso, to visit and pay attention to Nora when Joyce is not present. Robert is the name of the other chap in *Exiles*.

Prezioso is goodlooking, aristocratic and, at least by reputation, bisexual. It's round about this time Nora tells a good and reliable friend of theirs, "Jim wants me to go with other men so that he will have something to write about." Prezioso tells Nora, 'Il sole s'e levato per lei' (the sun rises for you)... In *Exiles* Bertha is told that Richard thinks the sun shines out of her face. And in *Ulysses* Bloom courting Nora tells her the sun shines for you.

Let me remind you of Katie O'Shea's description in court of her husband's behaviour:

inducing, directing and requiring the respondent to form the acquaintance of the co-respondent, and to see him along in the interest and for the advantage of the petitioner.

Remove the court language and this is a precise description of what Joyce is doing, and what Richard does in *Exiles*. Richard's ostensible reason for manoeuvring the connection between Bertha and Robert is so that she has her freedom, but there is something puzzling about this, as there is in Bloom's passivity with regard to Nora's romp with Boylan. The analogy perhaps is not so much watching someone drown to see if they can swim, but pushing someone in to watch them drown.

Nora tells Joyce what's going on, and Joyce... Well, his response is open to at least a couple of interpretations. One interpretation is that he takes fright at the real possibility of Nora going with another man and acts to prevent it. An alternative reading is that he springs his trap and leaps with gusto into a favoured role, that of the wronged husband. Either way, he confronts Prezioso and causes a very public scene, during which Prezioso is observed weeping in the street.

Joyce, it seems, is simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by all this. He wants, like Bloom in *Ulysses*, to have his ache and eat it.

This, by the way, reminds me of Paul Kelly's ex-wife Kaarin Fairfax talking of being loved by him but knowing that he never wanted to cut off other experiences of love because it was part of his creativity. 'There were times,' she says, 'when I thought: how many experiences do you need? How many experiences are there?' That and the myth of the artist's muse - preferably young, beautiful and female - must be the two oldest excuses not just in the book but out of it also.

And so to Ulysses. One striking element that every attentive reader notices is that the union between Leopold Bloom, the father who has lost his son, and Stephen, the young man searching for a better father, comes to... nothing. Bloom shows Stephen a bosomy photograph of his wife, offers him a bed for the night, and perhaps more. They go outside and, beneath the heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit, they have a wee together, comparing trajectories. Around about us there is perhaps the faint aroma not just of men's urine but of same sex attraction or at least curiosity, as there clearly is between Richard and Robert in Exiles. But Stephen, very gratefully, with grateful appreciation, with sincere appreciative gratitude, in appreciatively grateful sincerity of regret, declines the invitation, and walks into eternity. We are denied our big 'I love you dad, I love you son' moment, and the book is of course all the better for that.

Exiles is traditionally regarded as the artist's workshop, where Joyce is sketching out ideas, images, settings, language and concepts that he needs for Ulysses. It is perhaps his most overtly emotional work, and our actors do an astonishing job of showing that rawness.

But actually I see it the other way around. Joyce isn't sharpening so much as distilling, boiling off to leave an intense, perhaps bitter flavour. For me at least, it's taken nearly half a century to feel that I'm just beginning to get the hang of Ulysses - and yes, I did indeed start very young and I thank you for that madam - and to feel that I appreciate the depth of feeling that is so often glimpsed just out of the corner of one's eye. Perhaps I'm just slow on the uptake.

In conclusion... well, I feel that in conclusion my conclusion is downbeat, ambivalent, anti-climactic. Perhaps the best excuse I can come up with for that, is that Joyce's endings, with the possible exception of Exiles as you'll see very shortly, are themselves all these things. Not one for the big finish, is our Jim. So maybe that gets me off the hook. Because the one bit I cannot figure out, and I don't believe I've ever found anyone who can, is how to tie these two things together.

On the one hand you have the strong emotion, what Kraft-Ebbing calls the "sexual foundation," that is the artist's raw, and in this case very raw, material.

On the other hand you have the work itself, the finished art. What happens between them remains mysterious, dark, almost an alchemical process. No amount of talk, or of literary biography, or of literary criticism, or of literary genetics, can show us how the raw becomes the cooked. It's not enough to say that a deep wellspring of powerful emotion in Joyce "results" in these scenes from *The Dead*, from *Portrait*, from *Exiles*, from *Ulysses* and, for all I can tell (it's too dark to see clearly) in *Finnegans Wake*. The word 'results' is doing an awful lot of heavy lifting in that sentence. What does this mean? How does any writer or any artist turn his or her or their base material into gold? I regret that must be a subject for another time. Perhaps in any case it's beyond me. Maybe it's beyond anyone. Thank you.